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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the self-concepts of males and females in relation to academic achievement and describes a current educational intervention project at the junior high school level. A major portion of the paper reviews literature on sex differences for the variables of sex-role and achievement orientation. The literature reveals significant differences between females and males in their orientation toward achievement. Aspirations and expectations appear correlated with notions of traditional sex-role behavior and appropriate masculine and feminine personality traits. Research also indicates that curriculum intervention projects are more effective in changing notions about sex-role behavior with adults rather than children. The final section briefly describes the goals of the current project. Goals are to expand students' self-concepts to include a wide range of possibilities for behavior and to increase their academic performance in subject areas which have been traditionally viewed as more appropriate for either males or females. Materials have been developed for a social studies unit, Decisions About Roles. Students have the opportunity to gather knowledge, examine their values, explore alternatives, make decisions and then act upon them. Pre- and posttests for the unit include sex-role inventories, occupational attitudes and aspirations, and participation and confidence in decision making. (KC)

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DIFFERENCES IN FEMALE AND MALE SELF-CONCEPTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR AN EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION

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DIFFERENCES IN FEMALE AND MALE SELF-CONCEPTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR AN EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION*

ABSTRACT

Because of the differential impact of schooling and socialization practices, females and males differ markedly in certain aspects of self-concept which affect sex role behavior and influence achievement during the school years and throughout adulthood. Curricular intervention, particularly in the area of social studies, can provide a vehicle for change by providing pupils opportunities for gaining knowledge about the impact of sex role behavior and achievement, exploring values, and making decisions in a variety of school, home, and community situations. This paper will: (1) review the literature on sex differences for selected self concept variables; (2) present a model for curriculum intervention which is based on the above findings and currently being implemented at Florida State University.

School performance for girls, especially during the elementary grades, is often reported as superior to that of males (Frazier and Sadker, 1973). They receive better grades and participate in school activities more cooperatively. Yet during the adult years women display a pattern of underachievement in comparison to adult men. Beginning in the high school years, females decline in relative academic achievement, enter a more limited number of occupations relative to men, are less likely to complete graduate programs, and earn lower salaries than men.

External factors account for many of these differences: e.g., sex-segregation of occupations, economic devaluation of "women's" occupations, and discrimination in hiring and promotion policies. Socialization practices

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encourage males to take active, independent roles and seek success through their careers. Females are encouraged to show nurturing, dependent behaviors and demonstrate their natural role through child-rearing and sustaining the family.

However, even if external barriers to success could be removed and socialization practices modified, there is substantial evidence which indicates that psychological factors inhibit women's performance in comparison to that of men. The purpose of this paper is to explore the perceptions that females and males have about themselves, their self-concepts, in order to highlight those areas in which (1) sex differences occur, and (2) educational intervention may have an impact.

Definition of Self-Concept

A number of researchers have pointed out the lack of systematic conceptualization and instruments for measuring the psychological construct, self-concept (e.g., Lindsey, 1978; Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton, 1976). Shavelson et al. report seven common identifying characteristics of an individual's self-concept, which is organized, multifaceted, hierarchical, stable overall but variable in specific situations, developmental, evaluative, and differentiable from other constructs (1976, p. 435). Its importance is both intrinsic as a measure of self-worth and as a mediating variable related to achievement.

In considering dimensions of self-concept relevant to behavior as females or males, two variables seem most promising as mediating influences

to explain differing patterns of achievement. First is sex role orientation which has been measured for the dimensions of femininity, masculinity, and androgyny. Second is achievement motivation which can be examined by measures of aspirations, expectations, and attitudes about success or failure. A discussion of the research on both these variables follows.

Sex Role Orientation

Traditionally, it has been a common assumption that for girls, a high degree of femininity is correlated with a positive self-concept, and for boys, a high degree of masculinity is correlated with a positive self-concept (Sears, 1970). However, a number of studies refute these assumptions, especially for girls. Broverman and her associates (1970) found personality characteristics linked with femininity, such as dependency and emotionality, were rated by mental health clinicians as less healthy, less mature and less socially competent than those linked with masculinity. Sears (1970) found that girls who rated themselves high on traits of femininity had lower self-concept scores than girls who did not. Fearfulness, insecurity, and aggression anxiety were the femininity traits that most closely correlated with low self-concepts for girls and also for boys. Furthermore, studies on intelligence show that cross role sex-typing correlates with intelligence and creativity such that so-called masculinity in girls and femininity in boys corresponds with their higher intelligence and creativity than traditionally sex-typed children (Maccoby, 1966).

More recently, psychologists have suggested a third sex role orientation, that of androgyny, in which individuals "display sex role adaptability across situations, engaging in situationally effective behavior without regard for its stereotype as more appropriate for one sex or the other" (Bem, 1975, p. 634). Androgyny has been measured by self-ratings of females and males on the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) which includes socially desirable traits both stereotypically male and female (Bem, 1974). Individuals who score highest on androgyny display the least amount of sex-typing, i.e., the least difference between scores for femininity and masculinity. Bem (1975) found that androgynous individuals, both males and females, were more likely to show the positive masculine trait of independence when under pressure to conform and the feminine trait of playfulness than were masculine sex-typed or feminine sex-typed individuals. Females who described themselves high on the feminine sex-typed traits failed to show either behavior. Finally, Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp (1975) found that self-esteem among androgynous individuals was highest, followed by those high in masculinity and low in femininity.

Thus one may infer that an educational intervention which enhances traditionally feminine traits in males and traditionally masculine traits in females may improve their intelligence and creativity, as well as promote a wider range of positive behaviors which contribute to improved mental health and social competence.

Achievement Orientation

The second major self-concept variable, achievement orientation, is characterized by female and male aspirations for success, expectations for success, and attitudes toward success or failure. Sex differences have been documented in all three of these areas. Studies of children's aspirations report consistently that boys strive for a higher educational level than girls and that both sexes aspire to traditionally sex-stereotyped occupations (Marini, 1978). Aspirations as well as expectations for educational attainment among adolescents were found to be unrealistically high, especially for girls in comparison to their occupational goals. While there were no differences according to the prestige of occupations desired (Marini, 1978), traditionally females jobs cluster around nursing, teaching, and social work, high-prestige but low-paying jobs (Iglitzin, 1974).

Expectations and Aspirations. Expectations regarding academic performance have been shown to be lower for girls than for boys, even though females usually receive higher grades than males and have comparable levels of self-esteem. In a comprehensive review of studies Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) report this inconsistency regarding girls' expectations and performance abilities. When asked to predict their performance on a specific task, boys predicted higher performance levels than girls and often overestimated their performance while girls underestimated their future performance (Crandall, 1969). Apparently females lack confidence in their own abilities and this deficiency is evident at all age levels through college (Maccoby Jacklin, 1974; Block, 1976).

Explanations for this lack of self confidence are not clearcut in the research literature. Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) rule out the locus of control of reinforcement variable, i.e., external vs. internal. No consistent sex differences have been found on locus of control measures indicating that girls are more likely to think that events affecting them are controlled externally by chance or the power of others and that boys are more likely to think they control events internally through their own actions. However, studies in which participants were asked to assess their own strength, dominance, or power indicate that boys and men rate themselves consistently higher than girls and women (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974). In contrast, girls and women rated themselves higher in social competencies such as warmth and cooperation. Thus females and males may have comparable measures of self-esteem but with girls' self-confidence supported by their social abilities and boys' by their feelings of personal potency.

Other studies have examined the differences between females and males in the ways they explain success. It is hypothesized that these explanations influence expectations for success and failure as well as task persistence, regardless of behavioral outcomes (Safilios-Rothschild, 1979). For example, in a recent review of studies (Safilios-Rothschild, 1979), men with high achievement motivation explained success as a result of high ability and effort while failure as a result of lack of effort. In contrast women were more likely to explain success as a result of luck rather than ability (Safilios-Rothschild, 1979). Therefore high achievement-motivated men can

feel proud of success and try harder if they fail whereas women have less reason to be proud or feel confident of repeating success.

Fear of Success. In 1968, Horner first hypothesized that women may underachieve because they fear success. Since then a number of studies have produced conflicting results regarding her theory on the motive to avoid success, which was predicted to be more common in women, an enduring personality trait, and more likely to occur in competitive situations with men and in high achieving women. Horner's studies used the cue, "Ann/John finds herself/himself at the top of her/his medical school class," to elicit participants' stories about success. Although initial studies confirmed her hypotheses, criticism has been targeted at this construct from a conceptual/theoretical point of view. First, success is defined in a very specific way related to achievement rather than in a generic sense which would apply more broadly (Tresemer, 1974). Second, the medical school example creates a situation in which a female succeeds in a sex-inappropriate field. Responses may be different than those for a sex-appropriate field and may reflect the reality of problems that women do face even if they are successful in male-dominated professions.

Recent studies have not supported the original finding of a more frequent occurrence of fear of success in women than in men or in high-achieving versus non-achieving women (Condry and Dyer, 1976). It is further suggested that the variable is a situational one rather than a personality trait. Condry and Dyer in a recent study (1977) measured fear of success across age levels by obtaining measures of fantasy of fear of success as Horner did and also

measures of intellectual performance in a mixed-sex competitive situation. They found no sex differences in the fantasy responses but there was an abatement in fear of success for girls especially from grades five to seven. In contrast, girls' relative performance on an intellectual task declined over the same grade levels. Female participants who performed lower in the mixed-sex competitive situation explained that they didn't want to beat a boy in a game.

In summary, significant differences between females and males are evident in their orientation toward achievement. Aspirations and expectations of females and males differ and appear correlated with notions of traditional sex role behavior, i.e. that girls should not seek as high levels of education as boys and that they should seek careers which have traditionally been dominated by females. Differences in explanations of success and failure also reflect traditional notions of appropriate feminine and masculine personality traits. That is, females' actions should be passive but it's desirable for males to take responsibility for both their successes and their failures.

An Educational Invention

Given the differences between females and males in the outcomes of education and their differences in self-concept perceptions, what intervention is feasible to counter the status quo? To answer this question, a consideration of the age level at which such intervention should be directed and the goals of such an intervention follow. A description of

the Women s Educational Equity Act project, "Self-Concept and Decision Making Middle School Curriculum Project," which has been funded for 1978-1980, and its expected outcomes conclude this paper.

Age of Students. The predominant theoretical view is that children develop their self-concepts about sex role orientation at a very early age and are most influenced by parental socialization practices (Kagan, 1964). However, Katz (1979) suggests that this development occurs in stages in such a way that affect females and males differently according to the developmental task relevant at each stage. Thus for males, sex role expectations remain somewhat constant from childhood through adulthood. In contrast, girls experience a shift in norms from childhood to adolescence which contributes to their experiencing more stress about their physical maturity than boys experience, more concern about dating, and less concern about academic performance (Katz, 1979).

Research on curriculum intervention projects indicates that programs are more effective in changing notions about appropriate sex role behavior with adults than with children (Hahn, 1978). Among studies that have been done with school-age pupils, two trends emerge. First, the self-concepts of girls are more easily changed than those of boys (Guttentag and Bray, 1976). Second, children at a younger age level seem more affected than those at higher grade levels. For example, in Guttentag and Bray's intervention project at the kindergarten level, grades 5 and 9, students' self-concepts about their sex role orientation were more likely to be less

stereotyped at the kindergarten level and grade 5 than at grade 9 as a result of the project, and boys were even more stereotyped at grade 9 than before the curriculum intervention. However, there were significant interactions between teachers and level of stereotyping indicating that a few teachers were quite successful in affecting their students' self-concepts positively.

Because adolescence is such a critical stage for the development of self-concepts, especially for girls, and because many decisions regarding academic preparation for future occupations are made by students, the project I am associated with chose this age to develop curriculum materials. Few projects have attempted intervention to deal with female and male self-concepts during early adolescence. While there is some evidence to show that outside forces have created changes in women's attitudes about traditional roles during late adolescence, young adulthood, and middle adulthood (e.g., older ages of marriage, fewer children, and more professional training), there is no data to show that younger developmental stages are being significantly affected (Katz, 1979).

Goals of Project. The limitations of traditionally masculine self-concepts and traditionally female self-concepts have been outlined. Therefore a major goal of the intervention project, "Self-Concept and Decision Making Middle School Curriculum Project" (Massialas and Scott, 1978), is to expand students' self-concepts to include a wide range of possibilities for behavior. A second related goal is to increase their academic performance in subject areas which have traditionally been viewed as more appropriate for either females or males.

Social studies has been identified as a crucial vehicle for enhancing every pupil's potential and personal values (Michaelis, 1976). As part of a review of literature on sex roles, Hahn (1978) calls for studies to determine whether or not social studies instruction about changing roles can effect changes in females' aspirations and males' attitudes about equality. Therefore, social studies instruction is a major component of the project.

Description of Project. In order to effect changes in students' self-concepts and academic performance, these curriculum materials have been developed according to a decision-making model. Students have the opportunity to gather knowledge, examine their values, explore alternatives and their consequences, make decisions, and then act upon them. One unit of instruction, Decisions and You (Massialas, Scott, and Wheeler, 1979), focuses primarily on teaching students decision-making skills. It is anticipated that by gaining skill in decision making and having opportunities to carry out decisions, students, especially girls, will increase their confidence in making decisions to influence important events in their lives. Five student units with teacher's guides and pre- and posttests in the subject areas of math, language arts, physical education, science, and social studies complete the curriculum package. Each unit focuses on academic content relevant to the middle school with a special emphasis on male and female roles. The entire social studies unit, Decisions about Roles (Massialas, Scott, and Wheeler, 1979), focuses on roles comparing and contrasting them in a historical context with today.

To measure the impact of the curriculum, students took a series of tests before being exposed to the project materials. In addition to measures of academic achievement, students responded to five questionnaire instruments: (1) Elementary Sex Role Inventory (Thomas, 1979), which is an adaption of Bem's Sex Role Inventory (1974); (2) Occupational Aspirations and Expectations Survey; (3) Attitudes about Occupational, School, and Family Roles for Females and Males; (4) Confidence in Decision-Making Inventory; and (5) Participation in Decision-Making Survey. Students who participate in the project curriculum will be compared to those who did not.

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